

# US Civil War, slavery, emancipation: Lincoln, Django and Abolitionism

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TWO IMPORTANT FILMS have brought the issues of slavery, emancipation and equality to the public's attention as many Americans look back at our history. Both, along with a television miniseries, provide insight to the role of slavery in the U.S. economy, the emancipation, and how those events impact past and current political debate and policies — including the rightwing drive to erode and roll back voting rights for minorities, attack women's reproductive rights, scapegoat and deport undocumented families, and deny marriage equality and continue to discriminate against Gay and Lesbian citizens.

The most prominent is Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln," which details the inside game of Congress in its decision to pass the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishing slavery in 1865. The movie focuses on the horse-trading and vote buying of Congressmen (promises of jobs and other favors).

The implication is that Congress was the decisive factor in slavery's abolition. In reality, it was the military defeat of the rebelling southern states, the Confederacy, in the bloodiest war in U.S. history, that ended slavery. The struggle in Congress politically registered that historic change. The 14<sup>th</sup> (1868) and 15<sup>th</sup> (1870) Amendments that advanced legal equality for the former slaves and permanently destroyed the economic foundation of the southern rulers came after Lincoln's assassination.

The second movie, "Django Unchained," is set three years (1858) before the official start of the Civil War. It is a fascinating film (criticized by some prominent Blacks, including film maker Spike Lee, for overuse of the word "nigger") that shows the fundamental flaw of the founding U.S. Constitution, which did not abolish slavery.

In a compromise formula, slaves although they had no rights or legal voice were counted as three/fifth of a person (Article 1, Section 2), giving the slaveholding states disproportionate representation in the Congress. Legally Africans were property like cattle or sheep; electorally they counted as votes for their owners.

Django's story is both simple and complex. He was "rescued" and later bought and freed by a German-born bounty hunter who needed Django's help to find an outlaw. Django agreed to do so if the bounty hunter helped him find his "wife" —another slave sold to a new owner. (Slave families technically did not exist since their owner could and did sell them for financial gains.)

The domination, exploitation and the revolt of one.5lly shown. While Lincoln is well done, "Django

Unchained” is more satisfying because it shows an unapologetic story of legal brutality toward other human beings. (It was nice to see the slaveholders’ defenders die by the bullets of a recently freed slave.)

## **Blacks’ Centrality to U.S. Economy**

The most educational production — not a Hollywood movie — is the television PBS miniseries, “The Abolitionists: American Experience.” It shows how a minority of whites and freed Blacks fought against slavery from the earliest days of the country. These were the true heroes who set the stage for Lincoln and the Second American Revolution.

The series highlights the role of Angelina Grimke, William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown — and the most outstanding African American of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the former slave Frederick Douglass. The most radical abolitionists considered slavery immoral and opposed any compromise on the issue. Many believed that only a radical revolution could destroy the system.

The three films taken together give a glimpse of the real history of U.S. economic development, capital accumulation, superexploitation of labor and raw power.

In the South, slavery was a morally acceptable economic and legal institution. Slaves and their progeny were the property of an owner, and slaves were owned until they died. They could be bought and sold and their owners controlled their lives and those of their children.

Scenes in “Django Unchained” vividly show the selling of slaves as potential buyers check for possible defects. Much of the wealth of the manufacturing and agricultural classes was created by slave labor.

The entire country’s economy (not only the South’s) rested on the backs of slaves. The Constitutional institutions — president, Congress and Supreme Court — upheld the legality of the slave system. The Supreme Court, for example, declared the right of slaveholders to retrieve by force their slave property in non-slave states.

In their paper written in 2011, “Measuring Slavery in \$2009,” Samuel H. Williamson of the University of Illinois of Chicago and Louis P. Cain of Northwestern University explain:

*“A monetary value can be measured by a transaction when something is bought and sold, or as an expected value of an asset currently held. Some assets have value because of the potential income they can generate. An example would be a piece of capital equipment such as a cotton gin for which planters would pay to have their cotton processed, or a slave who would pick the cotton.”*

They continue:

*“The demand for a slave is a derived demand, as is that for any productive resource. It is derived from the demand for the output that resource helps to produce. There was an active market for slaves throughout the antebellum period, meaning that slave owners believed the purchase of a slave would prove to be a profitable expenditure, even though that expenditure required a considerable amount of money. As we will explain below, at the time the South seceded from the Union, the purchase of a single slave represented as much as \$130,000 and more in today’s prices. This was twice the average of 14 years earlier, indicating a sustained growth in the demand for slaves. Economists would say that these observations alone indicate that the profitability of ‘investing’ in a slave was increasing substantially.*

“Why would a slave have so much value? A short answer is the value of a slave is the value of the expected output or services the slave can generate minus the costs of maintaining that person (i.e. food, clothing, shelter, etc.) over his or her lifetime. A quick list of the things that have to be considered in determining the value of a slave’s expected revenue would include sex, age, location, how much he or she is likely to produce (a factor that included a slave’s health and physical condition), and the price of the output in the market. For a female slave, an additional thing to consider would be the value of the children she might bear.

“In addition, there is considerable evidence that slaves were worked harder than free labor in Southern agriculture, that what they could be induced to produce in bondage was greater than what they could be expected to produce with the freedom to make their own choice of labor or leisure.” [\[1\]](#)

It is not surprising it took a full-scale war to smash that system. The moral issue aside, for the slaveholders (who euphemistically called their rebellion a defense of “states’ rights”) their vast wealth was at stake.

There were approximately four million slaves, out of a population of nearly 32 million people based on the 1860 U.S. Census. At \$130,000 per person (average lifetime value), slave value adds up to about \$520 billion, 6-1/2 years of U.S. GDP in 1860 — \$82 billion in 2005 dollars. [\[2\]](#)

Without slaves there was no wealth. The founding fathers who owned slaves understood the wealth factor; Thomas Jefferson kept detailed records of the value of each one of his slaves even as he proclaimed his personal opposition to slavery. At the same time, he said Blacks were inferior to whites. Only John Adams of the first five presidents did not own slaves.

### **Turning Point: 1863**

On January 1, 1863 Lincoln issued the “Emancipation Proclamation.” It abolished slavery in the rebelling slave states — some three million of the four million slaves. This was not an Act of Congress but an Executive Military Order. The Congress, divided between supporters of abolition and sympathizers of the South, would have rejected the order.

The Lincoln film shows that a near majority in Congress in 1865, two years after the Proclamation helped turn the tide in the war, wanted to compromise with the defeated South on the issue of slavery’s legal abolishment.

It is not surprising that some of the most important structural changes in the legal standing of Blacks occurred by presidents issuing executive orders — integration of the military after World War II, and when extraparliamentary force was necessary as occurred in the 1950s when federal troops were used to advance public school integration in the South.

The Proclamation was a turning point in the Civil War because it dealt a blow from which the rebelling Confederacy could never recover. It set the stage for slavery’s abolition everywhere.

Up until 1862 Lincoln held the common “liberal” anti-slavery view: Slavery was morally wrong, but the solution was gradual emancipation better done by buying out the slaveholders and having the freed slaves leave the country through a “colonization” program.

Lincoln personally rejected slavery but believed that white racism would not allow Blacks to achieve equality as citizens. He initially accepted Jefferson’s view that whites and Blacks were two separate

nations.

Freed Blacks — and Lincoln spoke to a few prominent leaders — rejected any solution to leave the only land they knew.

The moral issue was secondary to Lincoln's decision to issue the military order. Lincoln had reached the conclusion that the Union could not win the war without the help of freed slaves in the South. Interestingly, from the outset of the Civil War this was the view of socialists, who backed the Union and the Radical Republicans.

## **Marx's View**

Karl Marx, living in London, explained that the North would inevitably win the justified war to overturn the slave-based economic system. He wrote that Lincoln had the ultimate weapon: freeing the slaves. Many German socialists and democrats came to the United States (after the failed 1848 revolutions) and joined the battle as soldiers and officers of the Union Army.

Marx explained in an article published in 1861 ("The Civil War in the United States," *Die Presse* No. 306, November 7, 1861, and in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Volume 19), "The war of the Southern Confederacy is, therefore, not a war of defense, but a war of conquest, a war of conquest for the spread and perpetuation of slavery." (It is noteworthy that the bounty hunter in "Django Unchained" is a German.)

Lincoln came to the same view in 1862 when the war was not going well for the North. He turned his back to the "gradualism" advocated by those seeking appeasement with the slaveholders.

On September 22, 1862, Lincoln wrote a "Preliminary Proclamation" as a warning to the rebelling states. He waited until January 1863, after a military victory, to issue the final order after it became clear the Confederacy would not end its rebellion.

The significant changes included no compensation to slaveholders, and no mention of "colonization" of freed slaves. The Union Army and Navy for the first time could accept former slaves and freed Blacks to fight. From 1863-65 some 200,000 Black men served in the military.

The defeat of the slaveholders was based on the revolt of slaves (like Django) and the decision by Lincoln and the Union to see Blacks as human beings even if not as equals.

The Civil War (Second American Revolution) completed the main unfinished democratic task of the First American Revolution of 1776. It formally and legally occurred after the war with the adoption of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, African Americans became "citizens" even if reparations ("40 acres and mule") were not paid.

The end of slavery opened the door to a biracial country and equality. But it was short-lived as the former slaveholders' supporters rose up to prevent the freed slaves from achieving full citizenship.

## **Civil Rights Revolution**

The counterrevolution by supporters of slavery and the Confederacy began soon after Lincoln's assassination. We don't know what Lincoln would have done. But we do know that the compromisers and appeasers to southern traitors got the upper hand by the 1870s. The period known as Radical

Reconstruction was short lived.

Many legal rights won by war were eroded and eventually taken away from African Americans in the South and across the country. Former slaves became (by force and violence, and new laws) second-class citizens in the country that they built.

White supremacist militias and the Ku Klux Klan began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of civil rights organizations like the NAACP began in the early 1900s to fight lynching and white terror.

The First and Second American Revolutions were incomplete because full equality for freed slaves and their descendants was not achieved. The historic scar of slavery was unique; Africans are the only nationality (except Native Americans) who did not willingly migrate to the United States.

What is now known as the Civil Rights Revolution was the struggle of Blacks and their supporters to bring back the vision of Radical Reconstruction to the entire country. It would take decades to end Jim Crow.

The 1963 March on Washington symbolized a movement that did not rely on white elected officials or the government to end segregation. The use of the tactic of civil disobedience especially in the South placed pressure on all branches of government.

King organized marches after 1963 even when new laws were adopted. He spoke out against the Vietnam War and organized the Poor People's camp in Washington DC. He was assassinated while supporting striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee.

The 1963 March on Washington put an exclamation point on the movement's decades-long fight for legal equality. The victories of the 1960s — the Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965) and other laws (which some call the Third American revolution) — fundamentally changed consciousness in the country. Even the far right rejects a return to legal segregation.

Many civil rights leaders became elected Black officials. The most prominent is John Lewis, U.S. Congressman from Georgia. Yet the election of a Black president has not prevented a sizable minority of whites from spouting openly bigoted views. The progress for the Black middle class hides the enduring racial inequalities.

The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, its origins and true meaning, deserve serious study by today's activists. The true significance of the Civil Rights Movement, the 1963 March on Washington and leaders like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Rosa Parks can only be fully understood in this historical context.\*

"Lincoln" and "Django Unchained," and "The Abolitionists" documentary are important contributions that should provoke more study of American history and the Black freedom struggle.

## **Malik Miah**

\* There are many excellent books on slavery, the Civil War and the Black freedom struggle. I consider Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956) one of the best. Eric Foner's books on Lincoln are very insightful as well. For the views of Marx on the unfolding struggle, see Robin Blackburn's excellent short book *An Unfinished Revolution. Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (2011), reviewed by Derrick Morrison in *Against the Current* [3].

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## **P.S.**

\* From Against the Current n°163, March/April 2013:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3807>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php>

[2] Source: Louis Johnston and Samuel H. Williamson, "What Was the U.S. GDP Then?" MeasuringWorth, 2011, <http://measuringworth.com/usgdp/>

[3] Available on ESSF (article 28258), [US Civil War and its aftermath: An Unfinished Revolution](#).